

EPICURUS ON THE ART OF DYING

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Whoever applies himself to philosophy prepares himself, directly and on his own account, for death and dying. Thus Socrates instructs us in Plato's *Phaedo*. For Plato and for the Christian philosophers under his influence, the proper way for the philosopher to prepare for death was to construct proofs for the immortality of the soul and to prescribe a pattern of thought and conduct that would ensure a blissful afterlife. Physicalistic philosophers have never been sympathetic with this approach. Because they cannot accept the dualistic analysis of death as the separation of a self-subsistent soul from the body, they deny that death is merely an unpleasant experience that one passes through; rather, it is a terminal experience, culminating in the irrevocable suspension of consciousness. The dualists may complain that their critics tend simply to shirk the Socratic task of preparing one for death. There is, perhaps, some justice to this complaint, except in regard to the Hellenistic period in which Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were greatly preoccupied with the phenomenon of death in general, as well as with the special problems involving violent death, suicide, and euthanasia. Epicurus was the first to attempt a satisfactory philosophical treatment of death within the context of an uncompromising physicalism, and he succeeded in establishing a formidable position.

Epicurus' view seems to be summed up in the statement, "Death is nothing to us."¹ A promised benefit of his philosophical system is that it relieves us of the fear of death:

... they anticipate or have forebodings of the eternal terror related in the myths, or even fear the absence of sensation in death as if it concerned them... But tranquillity belongs to him who frees himself of all these misconceptions and has a continuous remembrance of the whole and the most important truths.²

The myth of an afterlife of eternal suffering in Hades produces an intense fear of death. The myth falsely portrays death as a state of existence which we experience. Physicalism relieves us of this fear by teaching us that death is, rather, the cessation of experience. At death a human being simply decomposes. There can be no sensation of pain when there is no physical subject to sense anything.

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Death is nothing to us; for what is decomposed is without sensation, and what is without sensation is nothing to us.³

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us, since all good and evil are in sensation, but death is a lack of sensation. Whence the correct belief that death is nothing to us makes mortal life enjoyable, not by adding an infinite time to it, but by removing the yearning for immortality.⁴

Epicurus' theory thus relieves us of the fear of death, insofar as that fear arises from a superstitious belief in fire and brimstone.

Even if it is true that death entails the absence of sensation and thus of pain, a person may still experience a great deal of anguish at the approach of death and the cessation of experience. When we fear death, we fear the pain, not of being dead, but of anticipating death. But Epicurus argues that such a fear is entirely irrational.

So the man is irrational who says that he fears death not because it will be painful when it is present, but because it is painful while in the offing (*οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσας παρών, ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλον*). For that which is not distressing when it is present is painful in vain when it is anticipated. The most chilling of evils, death, is thus nothing to us, since when we exist, death is not present, but when death is present, then we don't exist. Therefore it is nothing either to the living or the dead, since it doesn't exist for the former and the latter no longer exist.⁵

This passage is reminiscent of the account of false anticipatory pains and pleasures in Plato's *Philebus* 36C-41B. Pleasure taken in a pleasant future state of affairs that will, in fact, never come about is false pleasure. Likewise pain suffered with a view to a future painful experience that one will, in fact, never undergo is false pain. A rational man will, presumes Epicurus, cease to experience the false anticipatory pain once its falsity is revealed to him, just as he would cease to hold a false belief. This is supposed to be the benefit of Epicurus' philosophy, that it demonstrates that the pain of anticipating death is vain and foolish.

Still, doubts linger. In the first place, has not Epicurus, in his preoccupation with the state of deaths, overlooked the phenomenon of dying? Although some fortunate souls expire painlessly in sleep, most people are not fortunate. Dying, whether due to sickness or violence, tends to be ugly, undignified, and above all, painful. It is not foolish to fear such an experience. Epicurus evidently tries to deal with such an objection. For he makes the point that although dying is painful, it is a relatively *brief* experience when viewed in the context of an entire lifespan.⁶ Although dying may be an excruciatingly painful experience, it is irrational to pollute the remainder of one's life with anticipatory pain directed to this relatively brief experience. Although my forthcoming trip to the dentist will be painful and I cannot help fearing his drill, it would be irrational for me to spend weeks prior to my visit in dwelling on those future pains, for dwelling on them is itself a painful experience which only amplifies the aggregate of pain in my life. Thus, although the Epicurean cannot plausibly claim that dying is "nothing to

us," he can argue that dying is merely one painful experience among others and that it is irrational to disrupt one's life with fear and pain directed to this one experience.

Epicurus appears, however, to have overlooked another, deeper objection. A person may be rationally afraid either of suffering a disvalue (pain) or of losing a value (pleasure). The person who fears death quite rightly fears losing the precondition of all values, his life, without which pleasure is impossible. Epicurus has misdiagnosed the cause of our "yearning for immortality" as a fear of a negative rather than as a desire for a positive: everlasting life. The easiest way to meet this objection would be to deny that life is really a value. This seems to have been the route of the sophist, Prodicus, from whom Epicurus is said to have taken his arguments that "death is nothing to us."⁷ If life is not worth living or if it is actually a disvalue, there is hardly any reason to fear death. Death will be welcome as a release from the prison of life. Such a pessimistic view of life held no appeal for Epicurus, who adopted the Aristotelian view that life or existence is of value, especially to the virtuous man.⁸ Epicurus directs a pointed *ad hominem* against the man "who says it is good not to have been born, but if you are born, pass quickly as you can through Hades' gates. If a man says this and is convinced of it, why doesn't he just leave this life?"⁹ Epicurus seems, therefore, to have left himself open to a charge of inconsistency: "in Epicurus we have an illogical combination of Hedonism with a view of death which is only in place in the mouth of a professed pessimist."¹⁰ How can death (understood as the loss of life) be nothing to us, if it is the loss of something that we value most highly? A rational man would prefer a longer life to a shorter one, even a longer one plagued by illness.¹¹ And a rational man would naturally prefer an indefinitely long life of pleasure to a pleasant life of limited duration.

However, even if Epicurus cannot maintain that the loss of life is "nothing to us," he does not seem to have to retreat very far. Even if he were to agree that the rational man will fear the loss of his life and will take measures appropriate to preserving it, Epicurus might still argue that it is not rational to dwell on such a fear, since this would only reduce the aggregate pleasure that he can enjoy during his life. Precisely because he values a life of pleasure, he must not be overly preoccupied with the fact that it will ultimately come to an end. Otherwise his fear will corrupt the very thing he is afraid of losing.

It may be objected that Epicurus' argument is still superficial, because he does not address himself to the fact that death is inevitable and it catches us unprepared, in the midst of uncompleted activities. Death may strike at any time. In Epicurus' own words, "Where death is concerned, all men dwell in a city without walls."¹² A person's full appreciation of his own mortality tends to produce a feeling of despair, an attitude that his life is futile and meaningless because any of his desires may be empty and vain. Death cuts off our projects. It leaves us

unfulfilled and incomplete. What meaning can we find in life by pursuing pleasure, if death always leaves us with unfulfilled aspirations?

This is a serious difficulty for any philosophy of life founded on materialistic and atheistic premisses. In the face of it, arguments treating death as the absence of sensation provide no consolation at all. However, Epicurus seems to have anticipated this fundamental objection to his doctrine. His treatment of the difficulty contains his most original and interesting work on the problem of death. The core of his answer to the objection is to be found in some highly compressed passages in the *Basic Doctrines*:

Unlimited time and limited time hold equal pleasure, if one measures by reason the limits of pleasure.

The flesh views the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and the time to produce it as unlimited. But the mind, grasping the rational account of the limit and end of the flesh and getting free of the fears concerning the future, produces the complete life (*τοῦ παντελῆ βίου*), and we no longer need unlimited time; neither does it flee from pleasure, nor, when events produce one's departure from life, does it come to an end as if it were lacking any part of the good life (*ὡς ἐλλείπουσά τι τοῦ ἀπλάτου βίου*).¹³

Epicurus is not claiming that a man, if given the option, would not prefer immortality. Rather, he is claiming that man does not *need* immortality in order to have a complete life or a good life. The fact of death does not deprive man's existence of its completeness. This line of reasoning differs from the previous Epicurean arguments in that it imports a crucial qualification: if one leads one's life in accordance with reason. What does Epicurus mean by "the complete life?" How does he think that, by the exercise of reason, our existence can be complete even though it is cut off by death? This is the argument that we have to understand, if we are to understand the claim that "the art of living and the art of dying are one."¹⁴

Epicurus begins with a distinction between two different ways of viewing pleasure: the way of flesh and the way of reason.¹⁵ In some sense the flesh views the limits of pleasure and the time to produce it as unlimited. There is a similar statement in the *Vatican Sayings*: "What cannot be satisfied is not the belly, as the many think, but the false belief about the unending filling of the belly."¹⁶ Epicurus does not mean that when a person is thirsty he desires, at that time, to drink an infinite quantity of water (which would take him an infinite amount of time). His point is clearly not that a person's thirst cannot be quenched on particular occasions. The "false belief" seems to arise from the fact that even if one of a person's desires (e.g. thirst) is satisfied, he has other desires which have not been satisfied and other objectives which he has not yet reached. Complete pleasure always seems to elude his grasp. At any point in time, a person always feels that he must live longer to achieve satisfaction. Death at such a point would entail fragmented and incomplete pleasure. Since at no point in time can he achieve fulfillment, the prospect of anything less than an infinitely long life span produces a feeling of despair, since he can never achieve complete pleasure. Such is

the point of view of the flesh.

From the point of view of reason, however, there are two fundamentally different types of pleasure: the pleasure in a movement or process (*ἡδονὴ ἐν κινήσει κατὰ κίνησιν*) and the pleasure of an established state or settled condition (*καταστηματικὴ ἡδονή*).¹⁷ I shall refer to these, respectively, as *process pleasure* and *state pleasure*. Process pleasures are the pleasures involved in filling lacks (eating, drinking) and in achieving goals (fame or prosperity). State pleasures are the pleasures of being in certain states of bodily health or equilibrium. The distinction between state pleasures and process pleasures evidently cuts across that between bodily and psychological pleasures (both of which are, of course, physical in nature for Epicurus). Peace of mind or tranquillity (*ἀταραξία*) and freedom from bodily pain (*ἀπονία*), on which Epicurus places the greatest emphasis,¹⁸ are both state pleasures.¹⁹ Unfortunately the precise meaning of the term *καταστηματικὴ* is not made clear in Epicurus' extant writings.

However, the distinction between process pleasure and state pleasure appears to find its ultimate origins in the discussions of pleasure in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. J.M. Rist has suggested a connection with Aristotle's distinction between pleasures in moment and in rest; "God always enjoys a single and simple pleasure; for there is not only an activity in movement but an activity of immobility, and pleasure is found more in rest than in movement."²⁰ But Rist himself has pointed out a fatal difficulty for this account; "for Epicurus, as an atomist, *all* pleasure must involve the movement of atoms, for atoms are constantly in motion."²¹ Thus state pleasure cannot be understood simply as pleasure in rest (*ἐν ἡρεμῷ*). This fundamental point seems to have escaped many of Epicurus' critics, who assumed that organs would simply cease to function once pain was removed. I suggest that the relevant distinction in Aristotle is, instead, the distinction between *κίνησις* and *ἐνεργεῖα*, which is central to his treatment of pleasure. Aristotle recognizes two fundamentally different sorts of human action: *processes*, like building a house or walking to the market-place, which are by their very nature goal directed; and *activities*, like viewing a work of art or contemplating a proposition of geometry, which are in some sense self contained. Processes take time and fall into constituent stages, e.g. laying the foundations or raising the walls in the case of building a house; activities are complete at every instant of their occurrence.²² In the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle is mainly concerned with showing that a pleasure (in the sense of "what pleases us"²³) is properly understood as an activity rather than a process. It is Aristotle's view that pleasure is "an unimpeded *activity* of the natural state (*ἔξις*)."²⁴ Nevertheless, Aristotle's distinction between process and activity seems to provide the conceptual basis for Epicurus' distinction between process pleasure and state pleasure.

In the first place Epicurean state pleasure is, according to Plutarch, associated with "the healthy state of flesh" (*εὐσταθὲς σαρκὸς*

κατάστημα).²⁵ In a similar way, Aristotle speaks of pleasure as the activity of the *unimpaired* part of one's state and nature.²⁶

Epicurus seems to have state pleasure in this sense in mind when he refers to the quantitative limit (*ὅρος τοῦ μεγέθους*) of pleasure:

The removal of all that pains is a quantitative limit of pleasure. Wherever the pleasant inheres, as long as it is there, there is neither pain nor anguish nor both together.²⁷

Quantity, in this context, is evidently a matter of the extent to which an organ is in a state of equilibrium and healthy functioning. A process pleasure which an organ is undergoing would fall short of the limit to the extent to which the organ is not in a fully healthy state while undergoing the process. In this sense, the healthy state of the palate would serve as a limit relative to the pleasure of relieving hunger. Quantity, in this context, obviously has nothing to do with intensity. This interpretation is supported by another passage:

The pleasure in the flesh is not increased, when once for all suffering due to need is removed, but only varied.²⁸

A healthily functioning organ can be exercised in a variety of ways. But in these various forms of exercise, what is pleasant is the pleasure of the established state, the healthy functioning of the organ. If the healthy organ is exercised in various ways, there will be no question of quantitative variation.

The distinctive feature of Aristotelian activity is that it can occur in an instant because it is complete throughout its career.²⁹ The same point seems to be made about Epicurean state pleasure, the "greatest good" (*μέγιστον ἀγαθόν*), in the *Vatican Sayings* :

The beginning of the greatest good and its enjoyment have the same time.³⁰

This account of pleasure is crucial for giving sense to the claim that "unlimited time and limited time hold equal pleasure." For if pleasure is, as Aristotle maintained, complete at every instant, it is absurd to worry about pleasure being rendered incomplete and vain as a result of death. However, this reasoning holds only for state pleasure, not for process pleasure. To understand how Epicurus' claim could be extended to process pleasure, it is necessary to explore further the relationship between the two sorts of pleasure.

A process pleasure, by its very nature, is a process that will cease to exist once its end is reached. The pleasure of drinking ceases to exist once we have slaked our thirst. When the pleasure satisfies a desire that is necessary and natural,³¹ it terminates in a state pleasure: the pleasure of a body in a healthily functioning state. However, there seems to be a deeper connection between the two sorts of pleasure than this. According to a traditional interpretation which allegedly has its roots in antiquity,³² all process pleasure supervenes on or presupposes state pleasure. This has been taken to imply that the existence of process

pleasure "always presupposes the prior existence" of state pleasure in the same organ.³³ This seems somewhat paradoxical, since it suggests that the organ must already be in a pleasant healthy state before it undergoes the process that brings it to a healthy state: e.g. that the tongue must be experiencing state pleasure before it can experience the process pleasure of drinking water and slaking thirst. Such an interpretation seems to be supported by Epicurus' statement that "wherever the pleasant inheres, as long as it is there, there is neither pain nor anguish nor both together."³⁴ If pleasure and pain cannot coexist, the presence of any pleasure, e.g. the pleasure of eating food or drinking water, entails the absence of pain; hence, it entails the presence of state pleasure. However, what this establishes is not that state pleasure must exist *prior to* process pleasure, but that some state pleasure must exist *at the same time and place* as any process pleasure. Epicurus' meaning may best be elucidated by means of another Aristotelian parallel. In the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that processes, in contrast to activities, can be pleasures in only an accidental sense. He considers the counterexample of a convalescent whose pleasure seems to consist in the process of recovering from his disorder. Aristotle allows that this process is a pleasure only in an accidental sense; his real pleasure is "the activity of so much of our state and nature as remained unimpaired."³⁵ Epicurus is evidently offering the same sort of account. At any time at which an organ is undergoing process pleasure a certain portion of it is enjoying state pleasure. At later stages of the process a greater portion of the organ is enjoying state pleasure. All the pleasure that there is at any time is thus *reducible* to state pleasure.³⁶ Process pleasure still gives state pleasure its variety. Numerically distinct instances of the same specific state pleasure could be differently characterized by reference to the different processes of which they served as stages.³⁷

This analysis permits us to extend the insight that "the beginning of the greatest good and its enjoyment have the same time"³⁸ to process pleasure as well as state pleasure. The pleasure taken in a process at any time is essentially state pleasure, which does not require the passage of time for its completion. This gives a satisfactory sense to Epicurus' claim that "unlimited time and limited time hold equal pleasure, if one measures by reason the limits of pleasure."³⁹ From the fact that our actions and projects can be terminated by death, it does not follow that our lives are incomplete, futile, and meaningless, because our pleasure, our ultimate value, is complete at every instant and thus *cannot* be broken off.

Epicurus is, in conclusion, prescribing a certain philosophical attitude that we ought to take toward our own future deaths. Death inevitably cuts off many of our projects. The artist is struck down before he can complete his painting, the gardener is not given time to harvest, the philosopher is unable to complete his system, the businessman is still struggling to create his financial empire, the parent dies before his

children are fully reared, the politician is assassinated in the middle of his elected term. In each case the dying person is engaged in an unfinished project. But it does not follow that the dying person has lived his life in vain. The project may be cut off, but the pleasures in engaging in it are not. The pleasures we enjoy while we are engaged in projects are to be identified with Aristotelian activity, the functioning of unimpaired faculties. Epicurus is not opposed to engaging in projects, provided the agent enjoys pleasure as long as he is engaged in the project. He *is* opposed to projects which require that one go "out on a limb," that one suffer much pain and loss at present for the sake of deferred pleasure. Hence, he generally eschews the life of romantic seduction, intense competition, or politics.⁴⁰ Epicurus does not have to be embarrassed by the fact that after a person has completed a long-term project, he experiences no pleasure. He may only have an empty or drained feeling. This in no way establishes the futility of engaging in projects. The true pleasure is the functioning of one's mind and body while pursuing the goal. Dealing with a new problem is more pleasant than mechanically performing a routine task because it places demands on our faculties which would otherwise fall into disuse and atrophy. The pleasure we seek when we engage in projects should always be within our grasp. This is central to Epicurus' art of living. But it is obviously crucial for his art of dying as well. If what is most important about engaging in projects is not the outcome, but something which is always in our possession, the fact that death may cut off our projects in no way diminishes the importance of engaging in projects.

NOTES

¹ *Basic Doctrines*, 2 (hereinafter cited as *BD*). I have used the G. Arrighetti edition of the Epicurean corpus.

² *Epistle to Herodotus*, 81, 82 (hereinafter cited as *Her.*); cp. *BD*, 12.

³ *BD*, 2.

⁴ *Epistle to Menoeceus*, 124 (hereinafter cited as *Men.*).

⁵ *Men.*, 125.

⁶ Cf. *BD*, 4 and *Vatican Sayings*, 1 (hereinafter cited as *VS*).

⁷ The allegation of plagiarism, going back as far as the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*, is reiterated in A.E. Taylor, *Epicurus* (London: Constable, 1911), p. 102.

⁸ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, 4, 1166a19; 7, 1168a5-6; 9, 1170b3-4 (hereinafter cited as *EN*).

⁹ *Men.*, 126-127.

¹⁰ Taylor, *Epicurus*, p. 103.

¹¹ Cf. *BD*, 4 and *VS*, 4.

¹² *VS*, 31.

¹³ *BD*, 19, 20.

¹⁴ *Men.*, 126.

¹⁵ *BD*, 20.

¹⁶ *VS*, 59.

¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, X, 136. I have used the H.S. Long text of Diogenes Laertius. The same distinction is described in Cicero, *de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (hereinafter cited as *de Fin.*), II.3.9. as between *voluptas in motu* and *voluptas stabilis*. The former is the pleasure of really quenching one's thirst (*voluptas ipsius restinctionis*) whereas the latter is the pleasure of having quenched one's thirst (*restinctae*

sitis voluptas).

¹⁸ Cf. *Her.*, 82.

¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, X. 136.

²⁰ *EN*, VII, 14, 1154b26-28.

²¹ J.M. Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 101-102.

²² *EN*, X, 4, 1174a1-b8. Cf. also *Metaphysics* IX, 6, 1048b22-23, where Aristotle distinguishes the activity as that action which contains its end imminently.

²³ Cf. G.E.L. Owen, "Aristotelian Pleasures," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. N.S., LXXII (1971-72), 138.

²⁴ *EN*, VII, 12, 1153a14-15.

²⁵ Plutarch, *contra Epicuri beatitudinem* 1089d (Us. 68=Arr. 21.3).

²⁶ *EN*, VII, 12, 1152b3-36.

²⁷ *BD*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ Cf. *EN*, X, 4, 1174b9.

³⁰ *VS*, 42.

³¹ Cf. *BD*, 26, 29. This pair of distinctions is, of course, due to Plato (cp. *Republic* 5583-559a, 571b and *Philebus* 62e).

³² Often cited are Cicero, *de Fin.*, II.3.9-10 and *Tusculan Disputations*, III.19.46-47; and Lucretius, *de Rerum Natura*, IV.627-629.

³³ Rist, *Epicurus*, p. 109. This interpretation was earlier offered by C. Diano, "Questioni epicuree," *Rendiconti dell' Accademia dei Lincei* XII (1936), 842 ff. P. Merlan presents decisive objections against this interpretation in *Studies in Epicurus and Aristotle* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), pp. 11-13. Merlan argues that the elaborate theory proposed by Diano cannot be supported by the brief passage cited in Lucretius (IV.627-629).

The pleasure derived from taste is confined to the palate; when it has been carried away by the gullet, there is no pleasure, as it is distributed through the limbs.

This passage is only concerned with pleasure derived from taste (*voluptas e suco*). This pleasure occurs just when the palate is exercised. The following lines make the point that this particular pleasure is of less importance than the healthy state produced through the digestion of wholesome food. It is stretching this simple text inordinately to find in it the thesis that pleasure in eating occurs only in the palate because, prior to eating, state pleasures exist only in the palate. He also points out the difficulty of reconciling the theory with *de Fin.* II.3.9.

Rist's reply (*Epicurus*, pp. 170-172) to Merlan is unconvincing. Rist argues that in *de Fin.* II.3.10, "Cicero says that he cannot understand what the Epicurean Torquatus means when he says that kinetic pleasures 'vary' our former pleasant sensations (*quae faciat varietatem voluptatum*) but that 'that pleasure' (*illam...voluptatem*) is not increased. Thus the nature of a kinetic pleasure is specifically said to be a variation upon an already existing pleasure..." (p. 171). However, there is nothing in the text indicating that state pleasures must exist *prior to* process pleasure. Cicero states not that process pleasure varies "former" pleasant sensations, but merely that it makes one's pleasures varied. *Illam* also seems intended to refer to the pleasure earlier referred to in the discussion, rather than specifically to a *pre-existing* pleasure. Moreover, "varying your pleasure" need not be introducing variations in a numerically identical pre-existing pleasure.

³⁴ *BD*, 3.

³⁵ *EN*, VII, 12, 1152b33-36; cf. Owen, "Aristotelian Pleasures," pp. 144-45.

³⁶ The objection to certain process pleasures, e.g. the pleasures of overindulgence, is not that, qua pleasures, they do not involve state pleasure, but that they incidentally have bad consequences, which impair the overall state pleasure of the organism (cf. *BD*, 8).

³⁷ *BD*, 18; cf. *BD*, 9, where the essential identity of varied pleasures is asserted. See note 33 above.

³⁸ *VS*, 42.

³⁹ *BD*, 19.

⁴⁰ Cf. *VS*, 51; *BD*, 21; *VS*, 58.